

Cowlitz Housing First! Coalition

207 Fourth Avenue N.

Kelso, WA 98626

October 9, 2015

Victoria Wachino, Director
Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
200 Independence Avenue Southwest
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Director Wachino:

On behalf of the Cowlitz Housing First! Coalition—a consortium of thirty (30) local organizations working to reduce homelessness in Cowlitz County, Washington—I am writing to express our strong support for the Supportive Housing Medicaid benefit proposed in the Healthier Washington Initiative's 1115 Medicaid Transformation Waiver application to the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Supportive housing is a nationally recognized evidence-based best practice for serving people who are chronically homeless and have serious behavioral and/or physical health disabilities. People who are chronically homeless experience significant health disparities, including high rates of chronic and acute behavioral and physical illnesses, risk of injury, trauma, and exposure from living outside, and barriers to accessing uninterrupted, appropriate levels of health care. As a result, this population also has high costs to public systems, including health care, due to frequent emergency department utilization, hospitalizations, and high utilization of other public crisis services.

A strong body of local and national evidence has demonstrated that supportive housing is effective in helping people who are chronically homeless access and retain permanent housing and regular, appropriate levels of health services. This intervention leads to housing stability, positive health outcomes, and improved utilization of health and social services. These proven outcomes result in significant savings to public systems that often exceed the cost of providing supportive housing. An evaluation of DESC's 1811 Eastlake Project, a supportive housing program in King County, found that over \$4 million in savings to public systems was achieved within the first year of the program. Of this total, 56% of the savings was in Medicaid cost reductions¹.

¹ *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 2009;301(13):1349-1357. doi:10.1001/jama.2009.414.

One of the barriers to bringing supportive housing fully to scale in Washington is a shortage of funding for the housing services that are critical to the model's success. If approved, the Supportive Housing Medicaid benefit will bring additional resources for supportive housing services to Washington and will help make the expansion of this intervention financially feasible.

In Cowlitz County, this benefit would assist the 74 chronically homeless persons we identified in our census this year who are currently living on the street. This benefit would allow them to have the supportive services necessary to stabilize in housing. We estimate that housing those 74 persons will save our community from expending approximately \$3,000,000 each year on methods that are ineffective and only address the community impacts of having people live outside—without doing anything to help them actually stabilize their lives and improve their health.

Thank you for proposing a Supportive Housing Medicaid benefit in Washington's 1115 Medicaid Transformation Waiver application. If implemented, this proposal will create significant health care savings while ensuring people with serious disabilities are able to live with security, autonomy and dignity in their own communities.

Sincerely,

Jon London

Jon London, Chair
Cowlitz Housing First! Coalition